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Tapan K. Ghosh, Bollywood Baddies: Villains, Vamps and Henchmen in Hindi Cinema

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Ghosh, Tapan K. (2013) *Bollywood Baddies: Villains, Vamps and Henchmen in Hindi Cinem*a, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 213 pages

1 The malicious characters of popular Hindi cinema have thrilled many generations of viewers in front of the silver screen and continue to fascinate through Tapan K. Ghosh's book on Bollywood's 'villains, vamps and henchmen'. *Bollywood Baddies* is not exactly an academic study. The book is rather aimed at a general audience. Yet this passionately written history of screen villainy could inspire further research, opening up the floor for a broader debate on the meaningful role of evil in popular Hindi cinema as well in the academic discourse.

2 Tapan K. Ghosh was a Professor of English and Head of the Department at Rabindra Bharati University in Kolkata, before he turned to creative writing. The author's background in both academic and popular writing makes his book an informative and foremost entertaining read. *Bollywood Baddies* does not convey one large coherent argument but presents many ingenious analytical details and smaller theses along with a historical outline. The book is divided into three parts. Part I titled 'Knowing the Baddies', introduces the reader to many different villain characters in popular Hindi cinema and sketches a history of screen villainy. The subchapter on the alleged mythological roots of film villainy appears as a rather distractive closing of the first part, as its generalized arguments are detached from the ideas laid out before and their explication in the following detailed film analyses. The three elaborate chapters of Part II analyze the

'Baddies in Action' and form the main analytical core of the book. Here, Ghosh recalls a large number of memorable main villain characters from the 1950s to the present, offers some new perspectives on famous films and explains the changes in the image of villainy from decade to decade by partly situating the films in the context of India's socio-political history. The historical narrative roughly suggests a successive 'strengthening' of the villain characters regarding their power, cruelty and charisma until a summit in the 1980s and characterizes the 1990s as a period of diversification and change. Part III describes some of Hindi cinema's female 'baddies' ranging from the vicious mother-in-law to the villain's mistress, under the slightly misleading headline of 'vamps'. A short chapter on the 'henchmen' reminds the reader on the villain's male supporters and the actors whose faces have been familiar in the roles of gang members, ruffians or hit men. The book concludes with a celebration of the most 'unforgettable baddies' and their actors.

Fascination for the villains

3 Ghosh makes the justified argument that the 'Bollywood Baddies' have 'stayed out of focus' (Ghosh 2013: 10) in hitherto book publications and attempts to make good for this neglect by presenting a history of screen villainy.[1] But his advocacy for the 'neglected villains' and their undervalued actors tends to be exaggerated. A brief look into the history of cinema discourse in India reveals that villains were by no means 'languishing in the darkness of disapproval' in the past four decades (*p*. 10), nor have they been ignored by film journals and magazines in favor of the heroes (*p*. 170). The fascination for villains has actually been nurtured extensively by film magazines since the 1970s, which Ghosh did not consult to proof his claim. For example, the article 'The secret desires of a rapist' in the magazine *Star & Style* (Bharathi 1978) features interviews with three famous villain-actors Prem Chopra, Roopesh Kumar and Ranjeet, who explain their feelings while shooting violent scenes. In 1979, the same magazine expresses the fear of the audience that the quality of villainy could soon be on decline, if no new talented actors would opt for bad roles. The article 'Wanted—a villain for raping, looting and murder' (Chand 1979) is a strong proof of the audience's appreciation of film villainy. And the prestigious magazine *Filmfair* dedicated a ten pages long cover story to 'The world of the villains' and 'The many faces of villainy' in 1985, which reveals the stardom that villain actors have enjoyed in the hitherto history of Hindi cinema (Gahlot 1985). The book *Bollywood Baddies* is rather a coherent continuation of villain fascination in Indian film discourse, than the initiating document of advocacy it claims to be. Ghosh's major accomplishment is not his approach of appraisal, but the huge number of films and characters he discusses and commemorates in just one book. He therewith provides the fans of Bollywood's baddies with a compact read but well-laid table of cinematic moments to feast on.

Pity for the villains

4 As the book follows up this special kind of cinephilia, the author's repeated attempt to victimize the villain reads surprising. The alternating modes of nurturing fascination and pity for Bollywood's baddies are confusing. The author requests: 'Dear readers, now pause for a while to think of the grim plight of these villains, and try to empathize with them' (Ghosh 2013: 9). Wouldn't this well-intentioned humanistic perspective destroy the very

meaning of villainy that the book celebrates, if it was adapted by the Indian cinema audiences? Wouldn't the fascination of larger-than-life villainy be lost when the audience begins to pity the 'poor villain' for the 'sacrifice he makes, and the humiliation he endures for ensuring the so-called 'poetic justice'"? (p. 4, 9) Pity, I would argue, is the strongest enemy of powerful villainy. And the obvious success of some iconic villain characters and their embodying actors proves feelings of empathy or pity redundant. Ghosh himself explains how the dacoit Gabbar Singh (Amjad Khan) in *Sholay* (Ramesh Sippy 1975) or the underworld dictator Mogambo (Amrish Puri) in *Mr. India* (Shekhar Kapur 1978) outplayed the film heroes and did not forfeit their popularity among the film audiences until today. The film critic and author Anupam Chopra recalls that 'Amjad Khan became a legend—Hindi cinema's first advertising icon: Gabbar Singh, the gravelly-voiced, unwashed villain who sold both records and biscuits equally well.' (Chopra 2000: 2). The actor Ajit, who was a top villain of the 1970s, 'triggered a spate of popular jokes and has several dedicated websites' (Gahlot 2001: 256). And the recent Telugu film *Gabbar Singh* (Harish Shankar 2012), featuring an unusual hero (Pawan Kalyan) who blends Gabbar's style of villainous madness with that of the honest police officer, is a tribute to an obviously appealing image of villainy, a phenomenon that transcends linguistic and historical barriers.

5 I don't agree with Ghosh's claim that the villains have largely been victims of disapproval —at least not since the 1970s. This is not to suggest that 'Bollywood Baddies' is superfluous, on the contrary: it raises the neglected questions of why and how villains became such appealing characters that they made their actors major film stars. Ghosh's study presents rich analytical material and first answers to this question, without exhausting the potential this topic has for the academic discourse.

A history of malice—a history of anxiety?

6 The main historical analysis (Chapter 2-4) observes the change of villainy from the 1950s until today. Ghosh traces how, with the increasing speed of industrialization and urbanization in post-Independence India, the evil characters change from being village moneylenders and greedy zamindars to the Mumbai based businessmen, underworld dons and crooked politicians of the 1970s. The 1980s yield the most 'mighty' and 'powerful' villains, terrorists and mighty underworld dictators, who challenge the formula 'the stronger the villain, the more charismatic becomes the image of the hero' (Ghosh 2013: 7). Ghosh explains how these larger-than-life villains, that force the heroes to adopt vigilante methods in order to defeat them, contribute to the blending of good and bad. He mentions that this uncertainty on moral values is grounded in the political crises of India's 1970s and 1980s political, social and economic history. From the 1970s onwards, appealing styles of immorality and lawlessness get incorporated into the figure of the hero and reach the most extreme blend of good and bad in some popular 1990s films: the roles of Shahrukh Khan as an obsessed stalker in *Darr* (Yash Chopra 1993) and the romancing avenger in *Baazigar* (Abbas Burmawala 1993), who charms his opponent's daughters to carry out a bloody revenge, are famous examples where the 'hero took it over from the villain' (Ghosh 2013: 131). Instead of narrating the duel fight between good and evil, these films present shady characters that exploit the moment of surprise, for example, when the lover unexpectedly turns out to be a killer and murders his fiancée. With the decline of action films during the 1990s and the return of the romance through

the concept of rebellious love, clearer distinctions between good and bad seem to return to the screen. The villains tend to become weaker than their powerful predecessors in the 1970s and 1980s. But Ghosh also notes that with the recent remake-wave the mighty villains have had a come-back, such as Sunjay Dutt in the role of Kancha Cheena in *Agneepath* (Karan Malhotra 2012), which presents an even more powerful and perverted villain compared to the original film from 1990, which featured Danny Denzongpa in the role of a smuggler and underworld don who enslaves an entire village.

7 Although Ghosh largely adheres to the historical narrative of the strengthening of villainy until the 1980s and a period of change in the 1990s, his numerous examples reveal that the history of Bollywood's villains is much more complex and diverse. The analysis repeatedly discusses certain villains that contributed to making their vehicles landmark films, like the moneylender Sukhi Lala in *Mother India* (Mehboob Khan 1957), *Sholay*'s dacoit Gabbar Singh (Ramesh Sippy 1975), Mogambo in *Mr. India* (Shekhar Kapur 1987) and terrorist Dr. Michael Dang in *Karma* (Subhash Ghai 1989). These seem to be icons of villainy that worked over time. While the greedy moneylender Sukhi Lala seems to be a very typical 1950s villain, the eccentric underworld dictator Mogambo remains an unrepeated character, the iconic exception of 1980s film villainy. Whether typical or exceptional, these villains seem to have influenced several decades of film making, film reception and film analysis. These examples show that understanding sameness and difference cannot be achieved by constructing a linear historical development: different film genres generated parallel histories of malicious characters, some outstanding images of villainy seem to be ahead of their times or remained templates for succeeding villains across the decades. Additional research would be desirable to explore in depth the narrative functions of different villain characters, how they change over time, differ in the genres and to what extend the conceptualizations of villainy reflect the sensibilities of the cinema audiences in the different phases of India's social, political and cultural history. What pleases the reading Bollywood fan turns out to be a disadvantage for the books argumentative depths: the attempt at completeness, namely the huge amount of films and characters brought up in the analysis, prevent the author from developing his claims into arguments and making his book into 'a valuable case study for identifying the social, economic, and political faces of India as the country progressed over the decades.' (Ghosh 2013: 4).

8 Explaining how Bollywood's baddies can be understood as indicators and factors of historical change in India could probably be best pursued in a clearly academic project. Ghosh's study offers some interesting starting points for further investigations, for which I would like to give some examples: discussing the film *Awaara* (Raj Kapoor 1951), he argues that much more than the hero character Raj (Raj Kapoor), it would be the villain figure Jagga (K.N. Singh) who exposes the problem of desperate people being driven into crime by a feudalist society. Hence, the 'socialist agenda of *Awaara* is most forcibly stated by the villain of the film (...). This point has hardly been noticed, the focus always having been on the hero.' (Ghosh 2013: 38). An analysis of *Awaara* from the perspective of Jagga could surely generate new contributions to questions such as how the socialist agenda of the Nehruvian era was applied, evaluated and probably also criticized in this popular film.

9 Another example where academic investigations could follow up Ghosh's book is the observation that the 'Dev noir' films of the 1950s and '60s, like *Taxi Driver* (Chetan Anand 1954), *Kala Bazar* (Vijay Anand 1960) and *Jewel Thief* (Vijay Anand 1967), employ a similar

narrative strategy of malice like the 1990's films *Baazigar* (Abbas Burmawalla 1993) or *Darr* (Yash Chopra 1993), by suddenly revealing an unexpected dark side of the male lead character (Ghosh 2013: 51-2). It could be interesting to further explore what makes these 'dark heroes' embodied by Dev Anand and Shahrukh Khan different from the anti-heroes of the 1970s and 1980s. Does this similarity in the filmic conceptualization also tell us something about similar experiences of social, economic or cultural conditions in India's history? Is the hope for a better life after the economic reforms in the 1990s equally perceived as overshadowed as the hopes for the Nehruvian project were in the 1950s and 1960s?

10 I suggest that studying popular film villains could contribute to reconstructing a history of shared anxieties and feelings of uncertainty among the addressed audiences. Such an endeavor would also have to investigate on the positive emotions and cinematic pleasure that the villains have generated. How do the screen villains begin to nurture fascination and admiration among the audiences in the times of Emergency and during the economic crises in the 1970s and 1980s, which are understood as a period where fear, uncertainty and anger were prevalent among India's urban lower classes?

Vamps and henchmen take a backseat

11 Already the cover suggests that the book takes the villains into the focus, while vamps and henchmen take a backseat: pictures of the major male villains occupy the front cover, the female vamps and only one henchman frame the back cover. In the main analytical part of the book, the female baddies and the villain's male supporters are rarely mentioned, but are rather briefly introduced separately in chapters 5 and 6. Unlike the main analysis, these two chapters do not aim at a history of screen characters, but are structured along the actresses and actors who famously embodied 'vamps' and 'henchmen'. Through the roles played by actresses like Nadira, Lalita Pawar and Helen, the author recalls the broad range of female characters morally opposed to the virtuous heroines, ranging from the cabaret dancer to the vicious step-mother. In the presentation of the 'vamps' a lack of a critical perspective on gender issues and conceptual clarity leads to more questions than answers. Are vamps always female henchmen to the villain, as the chapter headline 'That Other Self: the Vamps' suggests? Why did Ghosh discuss the non-vamp female malicious characters along with the vamps and not with the villains in the main analytical chapter? If Lalita Pawar as the 'horrid mother' in *Junglee* (Subodh Mukherjee 1961) or Aruna Irani as vicious step-mother in *Beta* (Indra Kumar 1992) are important antagonists for the narrative and moral logic of their films (Ghosh 2013: 136-38), wouldn't the analysis of their characters rather fit under the category of female villains? Are the malicious women not 'powerful' enough to qualify as 'memorable baddies'? Why couldn't women become icons of screen villainy in India?

12 Although the chapter on the female 'baddies' does not reach the analytical richness of the preceding study on male villainy, there are some interesting theses, especially regarding the development of the vamp in relation to the heroine, such as the 'idea that the heroines have taken over the seductive function of the vamps of previous times' (p. 131). Interestingly, Ghosh locates the beginning of the fusion of morally good and bad in female characters already in the 1970s, while he observes the similar change in the image of the hero only in the 1990s—an interesting point which deserves further proof and investigation. The actress Helen is clearly in the focus of the chapter. Her acting and

dancing style infused the vamp with both 'sex and sensibility' (p. 141), which earned her screen characters a great deal of recognition and fascination. With the strengthening of the villains since the late 1960s the vamps also became stronger, sometimes even to the extent of embodying 'the other self of the villain'. When the vamps' sex appeal became increasingly integrated into the images of heroines, the vamp had to be given a new place in the films' narrative strategies and appeared as the 're-vamped vamp' (p. 150), like for example in *Jism* (Amit Saxena 2003). Ghosh sees no such historic development in the images of henchmen, whom he discusses under the headlines of seven actors, including Jeevan, Sharat Saxena and Bob Christo. The narrative functions of the henchmen look widespread but minor and remain unclear in the author's brief descriptions. It seems that the henchmen have simply 'no emotions to convey' (p. 155).

Recommended for the connoisseur of Bollywood's filmic malice

13 Although the book is both an informative and entertaining read, it is not always easy to follow the quick changes between descriptions of characters, films, and scenes, which the author discusses galore. A novice to Indian cinema would surely get lost in the textual labyrinth of film titles, actors and compartmentalized scene analyses, which are not always in a historical order. Academic readers will find inspiring ideas for further research but cannot expect much depth and coherence in the book's argument—fair enough, for a book written for a general audience. For Bollywood fans and connoisseurs of filmic malice the book is a feast. With his passionate writing style Tapan K. Ghosh refreshes our memory of the many great moments of screen villainy and rightfully celebrates Bollywood's baddies as agents of immense cinematic pleasure.

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NOTES

1. Among the few exceptions are Deepa Gahlot's article on 'Villains and Vamps' (Gahlot 2001), which Ghosh quotes occasionally, and the biography on the famous villain-actor Pran (Reuben 2005). To my knowledge, no systematic academic study on the history of screen villainy in popular Hindi cinema has been published yet.

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